



ANDY COWLING 2022-06-20

## AGAINST ESCAPIST ENTERTAINMENT

NONMUSIC ENTERTAINMENT, FIELD RECORDING, MILLE PLATEAUX, ULTRABLACK OF MUSIC

In my album “star of the west” I documented the events that transpired in the USA between November 2020 and January 2021.

The original project creation and development was funded by a Stipend from Musikfonds e.V. The following is an excerpt taken from the original project proposal (written in September 2020 with realization timeframe from November, 11 2020- April, 30 2021):

*"In recent months, the public sphere of art has rapidly transformed into a domestic private sphere. In this respect, social distancing means not only distance from other bodies, but distance from the events of the world. Music and media serve as escapist means of distraction. On the contrary, my project tries to let the world enter our homes through music. The core of the project is an electronic composition that will relate directly to a contemporary political-social event. This event will most likely be social unrest."*

As a speculative endeavor, the series of events that are documented in "star of the west" were not totally unexpected. The unforeseen part was not the direction they would take, but, rather, just how dramatic the escalation became, beginning with the typical useless politicking involved in a presidential election and finally culminating with the storming of Capitol on January 6, 2021.

The sonic preservation and re-representation of these events on "star of the west" takes the form of an anthropological sonic documentary that draws on wide range of source materials, such as amateur cell phone videos, political speeches, Twitter/YouTube videos, mainstream news media, and sporting events, in addition to original materials, to provide an in-depth look at the subject matter. Some of the sampled materials are understandable and provide the general narrative for the events unfolding, while others are warped and distorted nearly beyond the point of recognition, used only to provide the necessary musical context to the events being covered.

For a short overview of what the album covers, I will refer to a message I sent to my friend and longtime collaborator, John-Robin Bold, as he was writing the album text (which I highly recommend reading):

*"[02:47, 29/12/2021] Andy Cowling: So for this text – the album is largely centered on the spectacle. Starting with the flyover and the national anthem reminiscent of football games. Overlaid with the spectacle that is the Covid pandemic. Moving towards an election that will result in essentially no change. The entire world is watching – also referring to the outsized weight this event has when it is all theater. Ending with scenes of a failing war. Just wanting to get some action and to prove the empire still has power. Moving towards then the failed rocket launch that was still heralded as a success by Elon fanbois. Overlaid with the naive expectations of the Hilary Dems of 2016. Launching into another rendition of a declaration of being ready to fight but having this super petty chant of na na na hey hey goodbye from a football game. Then we go into election fraud claims from trump and the again petty redaction from newsmx overplayed on top of the melody of America the beautiful. Then we have a long and anticlimactic celebration of the Biden victory. Hollow ideology and promises again culminating with the statement that it was like when the eagles won the Super Bowl. End of track 2 is the explosion from the failed launch with the song you are gonna reap what you sow. Next stage the Jan 6 insurrection. Again comically petty and naive. Moving into the hollowness of hyperpop and ultra naive idea that Biden has solved all problems as a coup attempt unfolds in real time. Ending again with this track refuting all claims of evidence – ending with the idea that really the problem was just simping for trump. Overall the album is super ambivalent to these overt political things. Critical of not just trump but also the idea that an "opposition" via Biden actually changes*

*anything whatsoever. “*

A fundamental element of the album's compositional process was based on collecting the source materials and forming them into pieces concurrently with the unfolding of the events being documented. This method of working concurrently was done so that the immediate impressions of the events could be sonically and structurally preserved. Also in terms of preservation, gathering the source materials immediately allowed for a much more comprehensive picture of the time because much of it now is buried under the deluge of new content, or, in the case of the more obscure and unseemly content, has been removed entirely by the platforms.

Through the course of the album, the suddenly increasing escalation is represented both by the techniques used to transform the sonic material and by the overall structure of the album. Because of the concurrent composition, the pacing of the album naturally follows the sequence of events in a relationship that is similar to what it was to experience them in realtime. This is reflected in the album being slower paced for “the entire world is watching” and “an L shaped W”, these being much more drawn out and making extensive use of different forms of time stretching. They also spend a significant amount of time building up the overall narrative and documenting a diaspora of events leading up to days before January 6, 2021.

In contrast, the final two pieces, “LeT\_s UniTe tHe CoUntRy” and “ur simpin\_ too hard”, are significantly shorter and utilize essentially no time stretching or methods of sonic elongation. Instead of dealing with a looming theoretical threat, these two pieces act as the bridge to the realization of that threat. The more pop oriented length, sound, and structure positions them within domain of “real” music vs. the more experimental first two tracks. Additionally reflecting the manifestation from idea into reality, the source material comes right up to the point where the the capitol is breached, but does not extensively cover the what happened in that event itself. These final two pieces are quite literally representing the peak escalation and logical(?) conclusion to the events and narratives that were established in the first two pieces of the album, and, because of that long build up of these narratives, in the moment that door is finally breached, the listener should hopefully already know what it all means without some kind of disaster-horror-porn sonic representation.

The narratives themselves that are presented on “star of the west” are not always individually damning in and of themselves. I intentionally tried to leave my personal position out of the album as much as I could. “ur simpin\_ too hard” is the only track on the album that explicitly breaches the documentarian style, as that particular track was originally conceived as something more like a “bonus track”. However, when presented simply as a chain of events, I think certain conclusions are pretty obvious and undeniable. The phrase, “giving someone enough rope to hang themself” comes to mind here.

A consequence of the detached or ambivalent documentarian perspective I used on “star of the west” is that, with the political climate we see represented on the album, and, depending on your personal political beliefs, the album *could* work from both the stereotypical conservative and

liberal perspectives. This duality works because the essential reality that is being represented by either of those fixed viewpoints is fundamentally based on a lack of real substance and nuance.

For example take the first track, “the entire world is watching” – a disfigured version of the US national anthem is accompanied by the national cathedral tolling the bell to mark the the 300,000 COVID deaths in the USA (2:10-7:20). The sonic representation would fit with the stereotypical liberal perspective that this is/was really devastating and under Trump the pandemic was handled very badly making it all much worse than necessary and so on. Whereas it could also fit with the stereotypical conservative perspective, being perceived as leaning more toward portraying the death of personal freedoms and liberties because of harsh COVID restrictions.

The seemingly dire nature of basically everything and its basic polemic division means that an extreme sonic representation actually has the possibility to effectively represent the perspectives of either of the standard American Republican/Democrat political camps. The fact that this is possible, as the information we can consume is theoretically the same, emphasizes the detachment from reality that has taken place and underscores the hopelessness of the situation at hand.

In the overall arc of the album, a clear perspective and position does emerge, but, within that arc, many of the individual situations that might at first be perceived as obvious, likely have more permutations as to what they are potentially representing. To the listener I would say, in those particular situations what is often meant to be conveyed has much less do with what is but rather with what it is not. To put it more clearly, there is an ambiguity that much more accurately represents reality.

### **Equivalent to when the Eagles won the Super Bowl**

As with the aforementioned dichotomy of perspectives (yet practical lack thereof) between Democrats and Republicans, there is a constant theme of the political spectacle being represented by mass sporting events in “star of the west”. Specifically in this case, (American) football games, as the campaign/election/inauguration season essentially overlaps with the football season. The intersections are manifold, and move from the societal into the political realm and back again as the album progresses.

For the first example let’s look at the introduction to “the entire world is watching” (0:00-1:40), what is happening here is that the various branches of the US Military was actively staging fly-overs of hospitals in 2020 to show their support of the doctors and nurses working there during the COVID-19 pandemic, which in and of itself is an ironic gesture, as the American military is the most well funded military in the world by a large margin, whereas Americans do not enjoy the benefits of universal healthcare. This type of fly-over spectacle is precisely what one would expect to find before the start of a football game. Continuing with the pre-game festivities we come to the American tradition of performing the US national anthem before nearly any and every sporting event. Indeed the disfigured national anthem featured on “the entire world is

watching” (2:10-7:20) was taken from the pre-kickoff ceremonies of a football game, rather appropriate to engage in an act of patriotic solidarity before engaging in a ceremonial and ultimately meaningless battle.

The terms in which the political competition frames itself also very comfortably fits within this narrative. In “an L shaped W” you can hear, “I’ve still got a lot of fight left in me” (2:22), which is what the 2016 Democratic National Convention’s anthem (0:17-2:40) decrepitly proclaimed. (As a side-note, I’ve chosen to use the 2016 anthem because essentially the Democratic Party ran the exact same strategy again in 2020, with the same people still trying to sycophantically draw on Obama’s “success”.) In this particular instance the comparison couldn’t be any more blatant, as the 2016 DNC anthem was literally called, “Our Fight Song”, which references the fight songs or team anthems that nearly every professional and amateur sports team uses to represent their team. This casting of fighting in terms of sports is also very accurate for the political situation. Namely due to the fact that the political “fight” is largely a complete illusion. It is functioning exactly like the fight songs do for the team’s supporters. Everyone can get all excited and start to believe that their team really is fighting so hard for the win, but actually the crowd just got all hyped up while the politicians did what they always do, nothing basically. Yet on the other hand, the romanticized idea of the fight is *everywhere* in America, and, when it does actually happen, people are surprised? The next section follows the dissolution into the fight song’s natural habitat of the stadium (2:41-4:45) and faint chanting foreshadows the appearance of the next sporting reference.

This section on “an L shaped W” (8:49-9:24) comes after Joe Biden has been unofficially declared the winner of the election and people are tentatively coming out into the streets to celebrate. In their growing euphoria, they join together and begin to chant the following, “na na na na hey hey hey goodbye”, which is of course the band Steam’s 1969 hit song, “Na Na Hey Hey Kiss Him Goodbye”. The chant itself though is famous today primarily due to its use during sporting events. First becoming popular with sports fans in the late 1970s, it is usually sung by entire stadiums to celebrate their team’s victory. The immediate understanding and joyful acceptance of Biden’s victory in these explicitly sporting terms clearly shows what the underlying concept here is, simply put, our team won. Just as the quote from “an L shaped W” says, the feeling of Joe Biden winning the presidential election was, “equivalent to when the Eagles won the Super Bowl” (14:22).

### **Today is the day American patriots start taking down names and kicking ass**

Towards the end of “an L shaped W” we can hear “you gotta reap just what you sow” (16:21-17:44), again we have an ambiguous situation because Trump is soon to be getting his coup attempt, the Democrats are reaping the rewards of their complete incompetence, everyone is reaping the result of the spectacularized coverage of politics, and everyone is reaping the results of their complacency with neoliberal policies that have eaten the country up from the inside out.

The storming of the Capitol was very clearly a coordinated coup attempt, and, even though there are a multitude of reasons as to why these seditionists were driven to attempt such a thing, it has

to be stated that all of these other reasons start lose relevancy when that violent overthrowing of the government is actually attempted because of the lies of a wannabe dictator.

Moving forward though, this problem is not going to be going away anytime soon. Once the legitimacy of free and fair elections is questioned and that doubt becomes entrenched, the foundations of “democracy” begin to crumble. In fact, I believe the decline is likely to escalate in the future. Increasingly dire economic problems are placing greater and greater strain on individuals and a true breaking point seems to be right around the corner. Politically, basically nothing has changed between now and then despite some deluded hopes that Biden would usher in a new progressive golden era. In contrast to that naive hope, the Biden administration is paving the way to a likely red wave at the midterm elections. Yet still, there is currently is no viable alternative political party to represent people wanting actual socialist or leftist political positions. I can say one thing for sure though, as shown in LeT\_s uNiTe tHe CoUntRy (2:21-4:32) a musical medley will not unite the country (haha) and this is clearly not where this is all going to end. If any positive can be seen in this, it is that in this coming time of crisis, when the bubbles all burst and the ballon finally releases its confetti, we can can have our Jubilee and begin again. On the other hand the possibility for a new positive beginning also contains an equal potential for just as hard of a swing in the opposite direction.

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